

Effective Freelancer Resumes

By Marian S. Greenfield and Teresa S. Waldes

So you've decided to hang out your shingle as a freelance translator and start looking for clients. Everyone tells you that the first thing you need is a resume. The problem is that you're not sure what you should say or how to say it, and most of the advice available in books or on the Internet applies to resumes for in-house employment rather than freelancing. We thought we would fill this gap by offering some specific tips on drafting resumes suitable for soliciting freelance translation work. Our advice is based on our many years of experience evaluating resumes from freelancers, and includes general suggestions as well as recommendations specifically applicable to the translation industry.

Getting Started

Before you begin writing your resume, you need to give some thought to the following considerations:

What are your strengths?

As the ancient philosopher said, "know thyself." Think about what you have to offer, what makes you unique. Make a list of all your qualifications and outside interests. This list will help you identify your strengths and will form the basis for your resume. You will eventually need to whittle it down, but it is important to start out with as much information as possible so as not to overlook anything relevant.

Who is your target audience?

In this discussion we assume that your goal is to work in commercial translation as an independent contractor. (If what you want is, for instance, to be a literary translator or a medical interpreter in a hospital setting, you will need to research employers in those fields.) Your most

likely targets are translation companies acting as intermediaries between end-clients and freelancers. After identifying your strong points, think about what the employers you are targeting are looking for. It is important that your resume be accurate, yet it should highlight your strong points and organize your information in a way that shows you in your best light to your target audience.

“...It is crucial to organize your resume so that the most important information can be gleaned at a glance...”

How to Package Your Message

The people who will look at your resume (i.e., project managers at translation companies or potential direct clients) are extremely busy. There are enormous numbers of aspiring translators out there all jostling for attention. Many companies receive an average of 20-30 resumes a day. This means the reader will look at your resume for just a few seconds. You must make an impression in that short time span or you are not likely to get a second chance. It is crucial to organize your resume so that the most important information can be gleaned at a glance. That's why we recommend that you place all your freelance-related information in a prominent position near the top. As your reader scans piles of resumes and gets to yours, that first crucial glance should land on the information most relevant for his or her purposes. Your clear, well-organized resume says **read me** while others are tossed out.

Heading

The heading of your resume should include all your personal data: full name, address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail address, if you have one (if you don't, you must get one before going any further). Bear in mind that Yahoo!, Hotmail, and other Internet service providers (ISPs) offering free e-mail have file size limits that could prevent you from receiving files (that is, jobs) from your clients. What's more, sending e-mail from such accounts really gives the impression of a dilettante. Also, remember that cutesy or racy e-mail names are best left for personal e-mail, as they are simply unprofessional. Consider spending the roughly \$35/year it costs for your own domain name so that you don't have to change e-mail addresses (and therefore business cards, stationary, etc.) every time you change ISPs. Be sure your contact information also includes a cell phone or pager number. Translation is a service business, and you must be easily reachable if you want to get work.

Most Important Information

Anybody glancing at your resume should be able to tell in the first 10 seconds that you are offering your services as a freelance translator in some specific language pairs. Either write *French-into-English Freelance Translator* (for instance) as a subtitle under your name or in the objective section. Many people who previously pursued other careers use their old resume and neglect to mention that they now want to work as freelance translators. Never make your reader guess—state clearly the kind of work you are looking for.

Freelance Translation Experience

If you are currently (or have ➡

previously been) freelancing, even part-time, the top of this section should read:

Freelance Translator [year]__ – Present

Under this item you should list your:

Language Pairs

Be reasonable. **Do not** list all the languages with which you are somewhat familiar. List only the language pairs you have mastered and are prepared to work with. Resumes with 20 language pairs generally wind up in the circular file. Only one language should ever be claimed as native, and if you claim to translate **into** more than one language, your resume should provide evidence that you really are qualified to do so. Resume readers are quickly turned off by grandiose claims of unlikely language abilities.

Make sure you are fully competent in any language pairs you claim, or you are likely to become a “one-job wonder.” Being competent means having at minimum university-level reading ability in the source language and native-equivalent university-level writing skills in the target language; owning or having immediate access to an extensive, subject-appropriate set of reference materials; installing the required fonts and spellcheckers in your computer; etc.

By all means, list ATA accreditation if you have earned it. Some translation companies claim that they use only accredited translators, and most will look at accreditation as an indicator of seriousness. If you have other credentials, such as a State Department examination or foreign certification, list them also. For any accreditation or certification you list, be sure to include

the conferring organization and the language pair[s]/direction[s] in which you are accredited and/or certified.

Either here or elsewhere in the resume, you should clearly indicate how you came by your language skills (through education, years spent in foreign countries, etc.). Some people like to have a separate section entitled “Languages.”

Areas of Expertise

Look up the list of areas of expertise on the *ATA Membership Directory* website (www.atanet.org/bin/view.pl/18756.html) and those used by many translation companies to cross-reference translators. If your expertise truly does not fit into the typical categories, create your own, but make sure they are immediately comprehensible to the average (non-technical) reader.

Hardware and Software

Do you have a PC or Macintosh? What word processing programs do you use (e.g., Microsoft Word 2000 Professional, Word Perfect 7.0, etc.)? Are you proficient in any other programs, such as Excel, Adobe Acrobat, and Quark? Desktop publishing skills are a real bonus.

Daily Output

Since deadlines are always tight, translation companies want to know whether you can do 4,000 words a day or only 1,000. You should also indicate whether you are freelancing full- or part-time. If you are only available to translate at certain times, be sure to specify them.

Other Services Provided

This section should list editing, proofreading, escort/court/ conference interpreting, tape transcription, etc.

Please note that all of the above information should be included, whether you have been translating for 20 years or are seeking your first assignment. If you do have freelance experience, you might want to mention some significant recent projects (include clients’ names **only** with their permission) or list the types of documents you work with. If you don’t have translation experience, you should really get some before applying to translation companies. Put yourself in their shoes—why should they take a chance on an untested individual? Try to find an internship in a company or volunteer to translate for worthy nonprofit organizations. Do anything it takes to get experience.

Other Experience

For the rest of the experience section, you can follow either the standard historical format or a more functional one. If you follow a historical format, provide the dates (year-to-year), title, function, company, city and state, and a brief description of your duties for each position.

A functional format puts less emphasis on dates and more on skills. This approach allows you to highlight how you developed translation-related skills and subject-matter knowledge. The section could then be titled “Relevant Experience” and grouped by skill, such as translation, writing, language teaching, or a particular technical field in which you specialize. Another option is to have several subtitles, such as “Translation Experience,” “Financial Experience,” etc. Bear in mind that almost anything you have done in your personal and professional life can be put to good use in your translation career. Your past experience in other fields gives

you credibility as a specialist translator (i.e., as a legal translator if you have expertise in the legal field, preferably as an attorney or paralegal, or as a specialist in travel and tourism brochures if you used to be a travel agent).

If you have gained some specialized translation expertise through a leisure-time pursuit or volunteer experience, include that information under “Relevant Experience” on a functional resume. On a chronological resume, it should be listed under “Other Activities.” If your hobbies and volunteer efforts are not relevant to the type of translation you wish to pursue, leave them out.

Education

List all your degrees in reverse chronological order. Give degree or certificate obtained, year obtained or expected date of graduation, institution, city, state, and country. Indicate your major, honors, and other relevant facts. If you did significant academic work but did not get a degree, you can also include that information. You could say “Institution XYZ. Coursework towards ABC degree or certificate/degree expected in May 200x”

Publications and Speaking

Engagements

List any translations you have had published or published translations you edited. Use standard bibliographic style. Also, list any relevant

articles or books you have written and conference or seminar presentations you have given.

Professional Affiliations

Mention membership in ATA and any other domestic or international translation and interpreting associations, or other relevant professional associations, such as the Society of Technical Communication, American Medical Association, etc.

Formatting

After gathering all your information, give some thought to formatting. A well-formatted resume is easier to read and helps convey your story more clearly. There are all kinds of books and software programs on resumes. Look around for inspiration and experiment with various alternatives. Check out links to other translators’ resumes and websites in the ATA web-based directory. If you have a recent version of Word, you can use Microsoft’s templates to create your resume (to find them, click “New” on the File Menu, click on the “Other Documents” tab, and then double-click on “Resume Wizard” and follow the instructions).

As the format sometimes gets garbled when resumes are sent as an e-mail attachment, it may be appropriate to send your resume as a PDF file. However, some translation companies prefer to receive resumes as a

Word file so that they can be pasted right into a database. Other companies do not accept resumes, and want applicants to fill out a form on their websites instead. Find out the employer’s preferences before sending your resume. It is a good idea to have a version of your resume saved in RTF (Rich Text Format) so that you can quickly cut and paste its contents into an e-mail message or into a form on a website.

Final Step

When your resume is finished, a final, often-neglected, step is to get a second and third opinion. This is important even if your resume and cover letter are written in your native language, but it’s really essential if they’re not. In either case, be sure that your materials are carefully proofread by a native English speaker. When we were in the business of hiring freelance translators we were amazed at the number of typographical and grammatical errors contained in the resumes and letters we received. You can well imagine that these were the first to hit the circular file.

You might think that going through all the steps we have described is a lot of work. However, we urge you to put time and effort into drafting your resume. A thoughtful, well-written, and well-laid out resume is key to attracting new clients and advancing your career.

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Proposed ATA Middle Eastern Languages Division

During ATA’s 43rd Annual Conference in Atlanta, a group of attendees met to discuss the establishment of a new ATA division, the Middle Eastern Languages Division (MELD). As its acronym suggests, MELD will be designed to serve as a nonpolitical forum that welcomes participation from all translators and interpreters working in the languages of this region. For more information or to volunteer with this effort, please contact Haleh Vakhshori, MELD coordinator, at eztranslations2@yahoo.com.